

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • REpublic 7-4215 extension 248

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WASHINGTON, D.C. September 11, 1965. An exhibition of the work of colonial America's greatest painter, John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), will open at the National Gallery of Art on September 19, it was announced today by Director John Walker.

The exhibition of paintings, pastels, miniatures, and drawings will be shown in the ground floor galleries through October 31. It was planned in observance of the 150th anniversary of the artist's death, and offers for the first time a complete look at Copley's work in England as well as in America.

A Copley portrait of the daughters of King George III has been lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II from the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle. In all, 57 private collectors and museums are represented by 77 oils, 6 pastels, 4 miniatures, 14 drawings, and one engraving. There is also a book of anatomical drawings executed by the artist at the age of 18.

The collection will be seen later at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (November 20-January 2) and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (January 22-March 6).

It is the fourth in a series of biennial National Gallery displays honoring a great American artist. Previous exhibitions were devoted to the art of George Bellows, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Eakins.

The fully illustrated exhibition catalogue, with text by

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Jules David Prown, professor of art history at Yale University, describes John Singleton Copley as "a painter without peer in the history of American art until the rise of Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins."

The collection begins with the first efforts of this self-taught colonial, including the engraved portrait done when Copley was 15, and shows the primitive technique of the earliest paintings. Later, when Copley became the best and most sought after painter of Boston society, he created the handsome portraits of such notables as John Quincy Adams and John Hancock, which are shown. Two of the best remembered pictures from this period in the exhibition are of his half-brother, Henry Pelham, otherwise known as The Boy with a Squirrel, and the prosperous Boston silversmith and patriot, Paul Revere.

"America's first master" was once described by a traveling companion as thin, pale, pock-marked, and with eyes so sunken "they seemed a day's march in his head." The spirited Self-Portrait in the exhibition appears to tally more with this rather unfriendly description than with the likeness shown in the more formal Copley Family. The latter is represented in the exhibition by a sketch and the finished painting.

In 1774 Copley went to Italy for a year, then settled in London for the 40 remaining years of his life. The exhibition has 47 pictures from this important period. There is his "diploma" picture, The Tribute Money, painted for the Royal Academy in London, and fine examples of the imposing history paintings for which he gained renown. The Death of Major Peirson, from the Tate Gallery, London, is considered his greatest work.

Of unusual interest are Copley's first great English successes,

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Watson and the Shark and The Death of the Earl of Chatham, the latter a large canvas with painstaking portraits of more than 50 noblemen present when the Earl collapsed in the House of Lords. He was making a speech in defense of his view that British troops be withdrawn from the American colonies in order to preserve the Empire.

Although Copley's influential father-in-law, Richard Clarke, was one of the consignees for the goods destroyed at Boston's famous Tea Party, the artist always believed that art and politics should not be mixed. Apparently his sitters agreed, for the taut portrait of patriot Samuel Adams was commissioned almost immediately after the striking portrait of General Thomas Gage was completed. It was Gage, as Royal Governor of Massachusetts, who eventually ordered the arrest of Adams and sent the colonial militia to Lexington and Concord.

In 1782, Copley, who was by then a rising Londoner, was credited with flying the first American flag in England after the Revolution. While working on the portrait of Elkanah Watson, an American living in London, which is also exhibited, Copley went to hear George III make the announcement of American independence. The artist returned to his studio and promptly painted in an American flag flying on a ship in the background of the portrait.

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Color transparencies, black-and-white glossy photographs, and catalogue on loan for purposes of publication are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 247.